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Omya tests show presence of 'tall oil' chemical in water

September 16, 2006

By *Bruce Edwards Herald Staff*

PITTSFORD — The state Department of Environmental Conservation expressed "serious" concern Friday about the possible contamination of drinking water adjacent to the Omya calcium carbonate plant in the Florence section of town.

Omya Inc. notified three homeowners this week that water monitoring has indicated the possible presence of "extremely low levels" of tall oil, a chemical used in the company's calcium carbonate production process.

Omya presented the test results to Department of Environmental Conservation officials on Thursday.

"It is important to note that the levels of flotation reagent measured were significantly below state health guidelines and the water does meet Vermont drinking water standards," James Reddy, Omya's president for North American operations, said in a statement. "This is the first time since testing began in 2001, that flotation reagent has been detected in water sources offsite."

At the same time, the company said a third test found no detectable levels of tall oil in the drinking water samples.

Tall oil is used in the manufacturing process to remove impurities from the calcium carbonate.

Reddy said the company was taking additional samples from all monitoring locations with test results expected within a few weeks.

He stressed that there was no health threat and the water was safe to drink and that the company wanted to "err on the side of caution."

"We want to emphasize that the flotation reagent does not present known health issues in drinking water at the levels indicated and the water continues to meet Vermont drinking water standards," Reddy said.

But the head of the state agency that oversees water quality expressed serious concern about Omya's test results.

"Any time a contaminant like this appears offsite in a drinking water supply, that is a serious situation even if it is below health advisory or action levels," said Jeffrey Wennberg, commissioner of the Department of Environmental Conservation.

Wennberg also expressed doubts about the validity of Omya's laboratory testing.

"At the very least, if Omya is correct and their belief that these are likely to be false-positive results, it calls into question the usefulness and validity of most or all of the information we've received from Omya from the beginning," Wennberg said.

Omya also detected tall oil in two surface non-drinking water sources near its

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Florence property, which Wennberg also called very troubling. Those levels, the company said, did exceed state health guidelines and the landowners at those sites were notified of the test results.

Reddy said it's the first time in five years that the offsite test results have shown the possible presence of the flotation reagent.

"While we await results from further tests, we are doing every thing possible to determine how the flotation reagent might have reached these sites," he said.

Annette Smith, a frequent critic of Omya's operations, also expressed concern about the latest test results.

"Omya has repeatedly said that there is no way this substance can leave their property," said Smith, the executive director of Vermonters for a Clean Environment.

Smith said the problem with assessing the potential health and environmental effects of tall oil is that there is limited data available on the chemical.

"There is no assurance that this is safe and unfortunately that is the case with lots of chemicals human beings are exposed to," Smith said.

She said that if tall oil is leaving the site, it raises the possibility that other chemicals used at Omya plant are also leaching into the ground and surface water.

Reddy, however, said test results turned up no other chemicals.

He said the fact that tall oil showed up in the recent samples was puzzling.

"That's why we want to get everything retested," he said. "It hasn't been there for five years in all the testing we've done."

He said additional water samples would be sent to two laboratories for analysis to insure the accuracy of the results.

Omya conducted water sampling April 24 and 25, another test July 31 and Aug. 1, and a third test on Aug. 21.

Because of quality assurance problems, the April results were thrown out by Endyne Inc., the testing laboratory. The second round of tests detected tall oil in seven of the 21 samples, including three drinking water samples. The third round of testing turned up tall oil in four of the seven locations "with concentrations similar to those of the second sampling round," the state said in its Sept. 15 letter to Omya.

Wennberg also expressed frustration over the delay in notifying the state of the July 31-Aug. 1 test results. He said Omya or its consultant, Dean Wechsler, Heindel & Noyes, was aware that there was a problem with the results because a third test was conducted Aug 21. Wennberg, however, said Omya didn't notify the state until Thursday.

"The agency is not comfortable with the delay that took place between Omya learning that and our learning about it yesterday (Thursday)," Wennberg said.

But Reddy said that the company did not receive the July-August test results until Thursday. He said what the company did know at the time was that there was also a potential problem with the validity of the second set of tests so a third test was ordered.

"They (consultant) told us verbally, we didn't get any report at that time, that there was some suspicious results that surprised them," he said.

Reddy said no tall oil was detected in the three drinking water samples in the third series of tests.

Based on Omya's test results, Wennberg said the three drinking water samples detected tall oil in the order of 40 parts per billion, which is well below the state guideline of 126 parts per billion. However, he said samples of surface water taken on the company's property exceeded the maximum of 126 parts per billion.



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In its letter e-mailed to the company Friday, the DEC outlined corrective steps and measures it expects Omya to take. If any testing detects an Omya chemical presence in drinking water, the state and the homeowner must be notified within 24 hours and the residents offered bottled water. The company must also submit plans to evaluate field sampling and laboratory procedures and make any changes to ensure valid test results.

Omya has been faced with several environmental and regulatory challenges in recent years. Questions have been raised by some neighbors and environmental groups about the company's practice of dumping its chemically treated calcium carbonate waste, or tailings, in old open quarries near the plant. The company has also had to tackle intermittent odor problems from the plant's smokestack.

The company said the water monitoring tests were conducted in conformance with the water monitoring plan approved by the DEC. That plan calls for samples to be taken from area water sources twice a year and analyzed.

Calcium carbonate is a widely used mineral used in the chemical, paint, paper, plastics and pharmaceutical industries.

Contact Bruce Edwards at bruce.edwards@rutlandherald.com.



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